

“Cah’i Orgel”

Editorial by: Roselyn Klein

For many visitors to Aruba first impressions can be deceiving. As new arrivals are transported from the airport to their various hotels they see the Aruban highway dotted with various American franchises. They stay at glamorous hotels, dine during the week at Italian restaurants and American style steak houses. Many never get beyond this tourist side of Aruba, getting to know the people, their traditions, and the strong feeling the Arubians have for their culture and history. There is a movement among many of those particularly interested in the music and traditional instruments of the island to bring an awareness and enthusiasm to the young people of Aruba for their historic customs. If any visitors of the island have attended the Bon Bini festival held every Tuesday evening at Fort Zoutman, they may have seen and heard a display of one of the more interesting aspects of Aruba’s traditional music, the “Cah’i Orgel” (pronounced Ka- ee- or-gal) as it is called in Papiamentu. The Cah’i Orgel is the traditional organ grinder we associate with little red-capped monkeys, from a day gone by. Andreas Ruth constructed the first organ grinder in 1842 in Germany. It became popular in Italy and Spain and then from there to Venezuela. Because of their close proximity to Venezuela, it was not long before the Sprock family of Curacao brought the unusual instrument to the Netherlands Antilles. In 1866 it became a popular musical diversion often accompanied by another island instrument called the “Wiri.”

Rufo Wever, one of the great names in Aruba’s musical history, popularized the Cah’i Orgel in Aruba. Rufo Wever is the composer of “Aruba Dushi Terra” the Aruban National Anthem, lyrics by another of the island’s musical giants, Padu Lampe. More than a musical instrument, the Cah’i Orgel embodies much that is particularly special about the traditions of the Aruban people. There is a love for the way of life that it symbolizes that proponents of the instrument try to pass down to the next generation. Hubert Ras and his wife Antonieta are very active in trying to organize events that bring attention to this aspect of Aruban culture. Hubert’s love for the instrument was passed down to him from his father Thelmo, and he is passing it on to his 8-year-old son Peter Angelo, already a virtuoso on the Wiri. Usually a part of possessing a Cah’i Orgel is the personal construction of the instrument, a requirement for being a truly respected owner and musician. It is a labor of love, with great attention paid to every aspect. For the finest tone, Rosewood is the preferred material for the case of the organ, and the average cost of the case alone is about \$2500 or more. There can be no nails used in the case as this will interfere with the quality of the music, so all joints must be fitted and glued perfectly. The inner frame that holds the piano wire and hammers is poured iron, and as there is no place in Aruba that does this, most are custom made in Curacao.

From start to finish it will usually take a year to finish a single organ, with an average cost of around \$6000. Each instrument is a labor of love, and given a meaningful and endearing name. Hubert Ras and many others have learned the art of Cah’i Orgel construction from a gentleman they consider to be the “Grand Master” of Aruban organ music, Alphonso “Buchi” Boukhoedt. Buchi is devoted to the instrument, and heads a foundation devoted to the preservation and propagation of the musical aspects of Aruban culture. Foundation Desaroya, Educativo & Commitario gives classes in construction of the instruments, how to play them, and reading and composing music. Buchi himself is a guest teacher at various schools has constructed 4 Cah’i Orgels in the 40 years he has devoted to them. He has written over 3000 musical pieces for the Cah’i Orgel, and guitar. He constructs and teaches the art of creating the all-important cylinders that provide the music for these beautiful instruments. The average cylinder contains over 9000 nails painstakingly mapped out and hammered into a wooden spool. They usually contain 8 to 9 musical pieces, each an average of 30 to 45 seconds long. Most of the melodies are traditional waltzes, mazurkas, and tumbas, but any music is possible.

There is even a cylinder of the best of Lionel Richie! Aside from the Bon Bini Festival, one would most likely find a Cah’i Orgel in attendance at the various public events held on Aruban Flag Day, Betico Croes day and other Aruban National holidays. On April 19, 2003 Buchi and other organ enthusiasts organized a music festival to showcase the Cah’i Orgel at Club Caquitio in Paradara, Aruba. Over 400 tickets were sold at a modest \$3 per ticket, and music lovers enjoyed a melodic and informative evening with a display of nearly 20 of the instrument. The night ended with several hours of dancing to the classic tunes popular to the “Barrel Organ” as it is also known. It was rewarding to all the participants that there is still a great deal of interest in this delightful slice of Aruban life and culture. If you are fortunate to be visiting Aruba around the time of one of their national holidays, take advantage of the opportunity to acquaint yourself with the Aruban traditions by observing on of the numerous festivities that will most likely be taking place on those days, and don’t miss this chance to hear the classic renditions on the Cah’i Orgel!

